

Harnessing Music for Youth Empowerment and Sustainable Social Change in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's youthful population continues to navigate complex social realities marked by unemployment, identity struggles, political exclusion, and shrinking civic spaces. Amid these challenges, music remains one of the most accessible cultural resources through which young people express aspirations, frustrations, resistance, and hope. Beyond entertainment, music functions as a lived social language that shapes values, builds community, and inspires action. Yet its role as a deliberate tool for youth empowerment and sustainable social change remains under-examined. This paper explores how music can be harnessed as an instrument for youth empowerment and sustainable social change in Nigeria. The study addresses the problem that, despite the centrality of music in youth culture, limited qualitative attention has been given to how young Nigerians themselves interpret music as a space for agency, identity formation, moral reflection, and social engagement. Four research questions guide the study, focusing on youth experiences of empowerment, identity formation, social awareness, and the sustainability of music-driven social action. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach, the study draws on reflective analysis, participant narratives, informal conversations, and contextual observation of youth engagement with music in social and cultural settings. Findings reveal that music serves as a platform for voice and visibility, enabling youths to articulate social concerns and negotiate identity. The study also finds that music fosters resilience, communal bonding, and critical social consciousness, particularly among marginalized youths. Furthermore, music emerges as a catalyst

for awareness-raising and moral reflection, though its capacity for sustained social change depends on supportive structures such as education, mentorship, and community engagement. The study contributes to youth and cultural discourse by affirming music as a viable tool for empowerment and sustainable social transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Music, Youth Empowerment, Social Change, Nigeria, Cultural Expression, Sustainability

Introduction

In Nigeria's dynamic socio-cultural landscape, music has long existed as more than entertainment: it is a language of expression, a repository of collective memory, and a vehicle through which young people make sense of personal and communal realities. Music permeates everyday life: from traditional genres rooted in ritual and communal celebration to contemporary popular forms that articulate the aspirations and frustrations of millions of youths. As one analysis observes, music "serves as an instrument of identity and social stability for the youths in the 21st century" by reflecting shared histories and collective hopes across diverse Nigerian communities.

Despite its ubiquity, the transformative potential of music, particularly its capacity to empower youth and drive social change, remains

underexplored in Nigerian scholarship and policy discourse. Yet, music clearly operates beyond leisure: it shapes social norms, conveys values, and amplifies voices that might otherwise go unheard. As Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the legendary Afrobeat pioneer and social critic, once asserted, "Music is a powerful tool for social change and liberation." This insight underscores music's dual function: it both reflects social realities and challenges audiences to think critically about injustices and power structures.

Contemporary Nigerian artists continue this tradition of social engagement. Research on Nigerian Hip-Hop, for example, shows that musicians such as Falz use their songs to critique social inequality, corruption, and youth marginalization, effectively turning rhythm and language into platforms for resistance and collective reflection. These

expressive practices resonate with youth across socio-economic backgrounds, fostering a sense of agency and community identity that extends beyond the performance space.

At the same time, the influence of popular music is contested. Some studies find that certain musical content, especially when mediated through social media, shapes youth attitudes and behaviours in ways that may be socially ambiguous or even harmful, highlighting the need for critical engagement with media and music literacy. Nevertheless, the creative potential of music to empower Nigerian youths, build resilience, and inspire sustainable social change remains a compelling area for qualitative inquiry. This study, therefore, investigates how young Nigerians experience and interpret music as a resource for empowerment, identity formation, and community transformation, foregrounding their voices within lived cultural contexts.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's vibrant music culture, there is a limited qualitative understanding of how music functions not only as entertainment but as a vehicle for empowering young people and inspiring social change within

communities. Specifically, research is needed to explore how youth interpret and engage with music to navigate socio-economic constraints, assert identity, and mobilize for positive societal transformation.

Literature Review

Music, Identity and Youth Culture

Music is described as a human-organized sound (Blacking 1973:57). Elliot (1995:128) defines it as a diversified human activity of creating aural temporal patterns for the fundamental values of enjoyment, self-growth, and self-knowledge. Walker (1998:57) believes it is a living analogy of human knowing, feeling, sensibility, emotions, intellectual mode of operation, and all other life-giving elements that influence human behaviour and knowledge. Music is a global method of communication that crosses borders, cultures, and time periods. It is a worldwide spiritual language that appeals to people of all ages, races, and colours. As such, Lull (1985:363) considers it a fundamental aspect of life.

Terri et al. (2008:148) also feel that music has the power to transcend social borders, express cultural meaning, and magnify message content that other forms of communication cannot reach. It serves as a

means of expressing one's cultural and social identity. For example, in the 1960s, when the United States was undergoing great upheaval and turbulence, music gave a platform for the younger generation to voice their views on the war, feminism, civil rights, and sexual freedom that were popular at the time (Esimone, Erhiguetke, & Amaka, 2023, p.1714). The instrumental arrangement and lyrics from a voice referred to as 'song', which unavoidably forces itself into man's conscience through his ear to persuade him to do what is right, have made the subject (Music) very special and distinct from other fields of life. Music is a practical discipline in all societies, with applications ranging from birth to death. Okafor (2005:2) properly states that "Music in a society is by nature dynamic, expressing the changed, changing, and still changing environment."

One of the traits of Youth music is what Schuker (2001) refers to as 'popular music', which he defines as music that appeals to a large audience. The word does not identify genre-specific traits, which change constantly in response to current trends in preferences among the majority of individuals in a given cultural group. There is certain music that has gained wider

acceptance among youths, and that makes such music to be categorized as being popular. Youth music is also known for its frequent display of angst, which stands out from its more popular traits. According to James Lull (1987), adolescent music is characterized by the public expression of conflict, making pain a crucial aspect. Adolescent music explores themes such as sexuality, identity, drugs, religion, autonomy, individuality, family values, dancing, social change, and alcohol consumption (Gold, Saarikallio, & McFerran, 2011).

Music affects the mind and its actions. For example, consider the circumstances in 1984 in Nigeria, when the country was under military administration. The Nation was on the verge of ruin, and the residents were dissatisfied, disappointed, and despairing of the then-leadership's ability to care for its citizens; as a result, the yearning to leave the Nation and journey out became the norm. A song contrasting Nigeria's great human inherent potential with the difficult reality predicts that Nigeria will overcome the obstacles. Nigeria's future was dark at the time, and no one knew what the next day would bring. Then Veno Marioghae's song "Nigeria Go Survive" arose, calming the

worries of many Nigerians who had lost hope in the country and bringing about social stability (Esimone, Erhiegueke, & Amaka, 2023, p.1716)

Music is widely recognised as a fundamental medium through which young people shape and express personal and collective identities. Scholarly work suggests that music enables youth to explore selfhood, emotions, values, and social roles in ways that other cultural forms rarely achieve (Luque, Suárez, & Gómez, 2025). According to research in music and adolescent wellbeing, “music can empower adolescents and facilitate their identity construction by fostering their own capacity for self-reflection, self-regulation, self-expression, and participation” (Saarikallio, 2019, p.89). making it a vital resource in developmental processes.

Such insights are corroborated by broader literature demonstrating that music functions as a symbolic practice that helps individuals understand themselves and their communities within their sociocultural contexts. DeNora uses the metaphor of a mirror to demonstrate how music can help people understand themselves better. According to DeNora (1999), music can help

us see ourselves from a different perspective. According to DeNora (2000), music can serve as a reflection of both past and present experiences, enhancing self-awareness. Listening to music helps integrate the past and present, promoting personal progress (Saarikallio, 2019, p.100).

Gold et al. (2011) assert that music choices can reflect an adolescent's emotional experiences. The idea that music might reflect adolescent identity is based on a receptive premise. It is assumed that music represents an internalized part of the young person, such as their history, expected future, emotions, or mental health. This construct is based on the Neo-Freudian roots that Robert Epstein has challenged in contemporary approaches to adolescence, and he emphasizes how many accepted beliefs about adolescence are reflected and reinforced by adult perceptions of adolescent music (Saarikallio, 2019, p.100). Ethnomusicologists, like Lomax (1976), have previously stated that national music reflects cultural values. It is feasible to approach music and adolescent identity more powerfully. He replaced the metaphor of the mirror with the more actively constructed

vestibule of a stage, which holds great appeal for this reason (Saarikallio, 2019, p.100).

In the Nigerian context, identity formation through music takes on layered cultural meanings. Studies of Nigerian youth demonstrate that popular musical genres serve as sites of identity negotiation and expression. For example, Afro-Hip-Hop and contemporary popular music provide platforms where young Nigerians articulate alternative identities shaped by global influences and local realities. Research on Afro hip hop in Nigeria shows that young fans use music and its audiovisual expressions to construct alternative social identities, underscoring music's capacity to reflect and reshape personal and group meanings (Onyeji & Onyeji, 2025, p. 99). The Youths are often caught in the web of identity; they either try to imitate an idol or want to be the idol themselves. More often than not, Music has been at the center of this identity and stability in all. Music has been at the center of this identity and stability in all these discoveries (Esimone, Erhiegeke, & Amaka, 2023, p.1712).

Youths participate in music in a variety of ways, often for personal enjoyment. The individual's emotional state

at the start of the music activity had a significant impact on how musical participation was perceived, with negative and positive moods producing distinct antecedent circumstances. When listening to music in a pleasant frame of mind, this was typically sustained, whereas a bad emotional state was usually improved. However, the nature of each individual's musical identity influenced this conclusion, with performing musicians being more likely to consume energy rather than generate it. The type of musical involvement also had an impact on the intensity of the outcomes, and this varied across dimensions such as whether it was private or shared, playing or listening, and how important the participant thought music was in their lives (Saarikallio, 2019, pp. 102-103). Youths used music listening in the 'now and now' to manage their mood, change their energy levels, and regulate their emotions. However, Saarikallio (2019, p.89) opines that youth use music not merely as entertainment but as a cultural language that situates them within broader sociohistorical frameworks.

Music as a Vehicle for Empowerment

Beyond identity, a growing field of research examines how music functions as a tool for

youth empowerment, enabling young people to articulate aspirations, develop skills, and claim agency in challenging contexts (Abiogu., Mbaji., & Adeogun, 2015, p.117). Conceptual work on music education highlights how structured musical engagement contributes to self-realization and life adjustment among youth, positioning music as an educational resource that builds confidence, creativity, and social competence. Similarly, empirical research within Nigeria suggests that music education and participation can offer pathways to economic opportunity and skill development, essential components of empowerment in contexts of high youth unemployment (Olawole, 2019, p.1).

Academic studies from other African contexts further reinforce this link. A Ghanaian study concludes that a well-developed music industry offers sustainable means of economic empowerment for Nigerian youths, with implications for poverty reduction and professional growth (Emielu, 2011, p. 59).

Music in Social Critique and Change

An equally important theme in literature concerns music as a medium for social commentary, critique, and transformation.

Studies of Nigerian hip-hop reveal how artists use lyrics and language to challenge power structures and advocate for social justice. Research analyzing popular Nigerian hip-hop music finds that artists such as Falz employ linguistic devices, including metaphor, satire, and code-switching, to critique social injustices, resist cultural hegemony, and construct alternative narratives that resonate with marginalized communities (Osondu, Ubah, Nwizu, & Umelo, 2025, p. 6418). This aligns with broader theoretical work on music and social movements, which asserts that music's expressive power makes it a central medium for cultural identity and mobilization across diverse contexts (Hartanti, 2025, p.55).

However, the literature also acknowledges complexities. Some studies highlight how certain musical content may propagate norms that conflict with social values or moral expectations, a caution evident in research indicating that elements of Afro-Pop and popular genres may inadvertently reinforce social vices or problematic behaviours among youth audiences (Oyenuga & Ajewole, 2023, p.14). These findings stress the need for critical engagement with musical content and the

environments in which young people consume and interpret music.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore Nigerian youths lived experiences and interpretations of music as a tool for empowerment and social change. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine how Nigerian youths understand and describe the role of music in their personal sense of empowerment, including its influence on self-confidence, voice, motivation, and perceived agency.
2. investigate youths' perceptions of the ways music contributes to social awareness and social transformation within their communities, particularly in relation to societal challenges, moral consciousness, and collective dialogue.
3. explore the meanings Nigerian youths attach to different musical genres, styles, and lyrical themes in shaping identity formation, cultural belonging, and generational expression.
4. identify how young Nigerians utilize music in their everyday lives as a

mechanism for emotional resilience, creative expression, community participation, and sociopolitical engagement.

Research Questions

1. How do Nigerian youths describe the role of music in their personal sense of empowerment?
2. In what ways do young people perceive music as influencing social awareness and transformation in their communities?
3. What meanings do youths attribute to different genres or themes of music in relation to identity formation?
4. How do young Nigerians activate music in their daily lives as a mechanism for resilience, expression, or sociopolitical engagement?

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of young Nigerians who engage with music either as listeners, performers, or community participants. Data will be derived from participant narratives, reflections, conversations, and in-depth engagement with music practices in their

natural contexts (e.g., music gatherings, cultural events, informal discussions)

Significance of the Study

The study enhances understanding of the intrinsic and socially embedded ways music can empower youths, enrich cultural identity,

and contribute to grassroots social transformation. It provides theoretical perspectives for policymakers, educators, and arts practitioners on leveraging music as an inclusive tool for youth development and sustainable societal change.

Findings of the Study

Table 1: Thematic Presentation of Findings

Themes	Descriptions	Supporting Insights (Participants' Lived Meanings)
Music as Personal Empowerment and Voice	Music emerged as a medium through which youths experience confidence, self-worth, and visibility. It enables expression of emotions and perspectives often excluded from formal social spaces.	Participants described music as giving them “a voice,” enhancing self-confidence, validating personal talents, and providing a sense of relevance within society.
Music and Social Awareness	Music functions as a channel for social education, awareness creation, and reflection on societal issues affecting youths and communities.	Youths identified songs addressing corruption, inequality, governance, and moral decline as shaping their understanding of social realities and encouraging dialogue among peers.
Music in Identity Formation	Engagement with music contributes significantly to the construction and negotiation of youth identity within cultural and generational contexts.	Participants associated musical genres with cultural heritage, faith expression, generational belonging, and modern African

		identity influenced by globalization.
Music as Emotional Support and Resilience	Music provides emotional regulation and psychological stability in the face of socio-economic pressure and uncertainty.	Youths reported using music to cope with stress, unemployment, academic pressure, disappointment, and anxiety, describing it as a source of motivation and hope.
Every day Musical Practices as Social Engagement	Music is embedded in daily youth life and functions as an informal avenue for participation, solidarity, and collective meaning-making.	Participants engaged with music through worship, social media, community events, protests, and informal gatherings, transforming music into a participatory social tool.
Music and Community Cohesion	Shared musical experiences strengthen interpersonal bonds and promote unity among diverse youth groups.	Group singing, performances, and music sharing were perceived as fostering friendship, collaboration, and communal belonging across ethnic and social boundaries.
Constraints to Sustainable Social Change	While music empowers youths, its long-term social impact depends on supportive institutional and educational frameworks.	Participants observed that without mentorship, ethical guidance, and structured opportunities, musical influence may remain symbolic rather than transformative.

The findings presented in the table emerge from the lived experiences, reflections, and every day musical engagements of Nigerian

youths. Rather than presenting statistical outcomes, the results are organized thematically to reflect shared meanings,

perceptions, and patterns that surfaced through participant narratives and contextual observation.

1. Music as a Source of Personal Empowerment and Voice

A major finding of the study is that Nigerian youths perceive music as a powerful medium of personal empowerment. Participants consistently described music as giving them a voice, a way to articulate emotions, opinions, and experiences that are often silenced in formal social spaces. Through listening, performing, or composing music, young people reported increased self-confidence, emotional release, and a sense of visibility within their communities.

For many participants, music functioned as a platform where they felt heard and valued, especially in contexts marked by economic uncertainty and limited opportunities. Engagement with music enabled youths to redefine their self-worth, affirm personal talents, and imagine alternative life possibilities beyond social constraints.

2. Music as a Tool for Social Awareness and Community Consciousness

Findings reveal that youths perceive music as an important medium for raising social

awareness and stimulating public reflection. Participants identified songs that address corruption, inequality, governance, moral decline, and youth marginalization as influential in shaping their understanding of societal issues.

Rather than provoking direct activism alone, music was found to promote consciousness building, helping young people reflect critically on social realities and communal responsibilities. Participants noted that music often initiates conversations within peer groups, religious gatherings, and online communities, thereby strengthening collective awareness and dialogue around social challenges.

3. Music and Youth Identity Formation

The study further found that music plays a central role in identity formation among Nigerian youths. Participants associated specific genres, lyrical themes, and musical styles with expressions of cultural belonging, generational identity, faith orientation, and social positioning. Traditional and indigenous music forms were often linked to cultural memory and heritage, while contemporary genres such as Afrobeat, gospel, and hip-hop were viewed as tools for negotiating modern identity within a

globalized society. Youths described music as a mirror through which they understand who they are, where they come from, and how they relate to others. This suggests that musical engagement serves as an ongoing process of identity negotiation rather than a fixed outcome.

4. Music as a Mechanism for Resilience and Emotional Well-Being

Another significant finding is the role of music in fostering resilience. Participants frequently described using music to cope with stress, disappointment, and uncertainty associated with unemployment, academic pressure, and social instability. Music listening and participation provided emotional comfort, motivation, and psychological balance. In this sense, music functioned as a form of informal self-therapy, helping youths regulate emotions, sustain hope, and maintain inner stability. This emotional dimension of music was viewed as foundational to empowerment, as it strengthened youths' capacity to endure hardship and remain socially engaged.

5. Every day Musical Practices as Forms of Social Engagement

The study also found that youths actively integrate music into daily life as a means of

expression and engagement. Music was used in religious worship, community events, social media interactions, protests, and informal gatherings. These everyday practices transformed music from a passive activity into a participatory social tool.

Participants emphasized that even when music does not immediately lead to structural change, it nurtures solidarity, collective memory, and moral reflection, essential elements for sustainable social transformation.

6. Limitations to Sustainable Impact

While participants affirmed music's empowering potential, findings also indicate that its capacity for long-term social change is influenced by structural factors. Youths acknowledged that without educational support, mentorship, ethical guidance, and institutional platforms, the impact of music may remain temporary or symbolic. This underscores the need for intentional frameworks that connect musical creativity with broader developmental structures.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined how Nigerian youths perceive and experience music as a tool for empowerment and sustainable social change. The findings align strongly with existing

scholarship that positions music as a socio-cultural force capable of shaping identity, agency, and collective consciousness.

Findings indicate that music provides Nigerian youths with a sense of voice, confidence, and self-worth. This supports the argument of DeNora (2000), who asserts that music functions as a “technology of the self,” enabling individuals to regulate emotions, construct meaning, and negotiate personal identity within everyday life. Youth engagement with music, therefore, becomes a process through which personal agency is reclaimed in environments often marked by marginalization and limited opportunity.

Similarly, Campbell (2010) emphasizes that musical participation allows young people to express narratives that are frequently excluded from dominant social discourse. The present study confirms this position, as participants consistently described music as a channel through which they articulate personal struggles and aspirations.

Furthermore, the study’s findings that music promotes social consciousness resonate with research on popular music and social commentary in Africa. Omojola (2014) argues that African popular music

historically functions as a medium for political expression and moral critique, particularly among youths. Nigerian youth music continues this tradition by translating lived realities into accessible narratives.

Studies on Nigerian hip-hop further validate this role. Research published in the *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* shows that contemporary Nigerian artists employ music to critique corruption, inequality, and governance failures, contributing to civic awareness among youth audiences (Adeosun, 2021). This supports the finding that music often initiates reflection and dialogue rather than immediate activism.

In addition, the role of music in identity construction identified in this study aligns with global youth-culture literature. Bennett (2000) explains that music is central to how young people define belonging, difference, and cultural positioning. Nigerian youths’ attachment to Afrobeats, gospel, hip-hop, and indigenous genres reflect an ongoing negotiation between tradition and globalization.

African scholarship further affirms this view. Agawu (2003) argues that African musical practices are deeply tied to identity, memory, and worldview. Participants’

association of music with cultural roots and generational identity illustrates how musical engagement becomes both personal and communal.

Moreover, the finding that youths rely on music for emotional stability corresponds with studies in music psychology. Hallam (2010) demonstrates that musical engagement enhances emotional regulation, motivation, and coping capacity among young people. Music's role in reducing stress and sustaining hope is particularly significant within contexts of unemployment and socio-economic uncertainty, such as in Nigeria. Furthermore, McFerran (2016) emphasizes that informal music listening and participation often serve therapeutic functions for youths, even outside clinical settings. The present study confirms this perspective, revealing music as an accessible coping resource embedded in everyday life.

Also, findings showing music as a tool for social bonding and communal participation align with Turino's (2008) distinction between participatory and presentational music. Youth involvement in communal singing, worship music, online sharing, and performances strengthens interpersonal relationships and reinforces

collective identity. This supports African ethnomusicological perspectives that view music as inherently social rather than individualistic (Nketia, 1974). The study demonstrates that every day musical practices contribute meaningfully to social cohesion, particularly among culturally diverse youth populations.

While music was found to inspire empowerment and awareness, participants also recognized structural limitations to its long-term impact. This observation reflects arguments by UNESCO (2013), which caution that creative expression alone cannot sustain development without educational, institutional, and policy support. Scholars such as Throsby (2010) further note that cultural practices achieve sustainability only when linked to systems of mentorship, ethical guidance, and economic structure. This reinforces the study's conclusion that music's transformative power must be intentionally integrated into broader youth development frameworks.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Nigerian youths perceive and experience music as a tool for empowerment and sustainable social change. Drawing from a qualitative

phenomenological approach, the study foregrounded youths lived experiences and everyday engagement with music as listeners, performers, and community participants. The findings demonstrate that music occupies a central position in youth life, functioning not merely as entertainment but as a meaningful cultural resource for expression, identity formation, emotional resilience, and social engagement.

The study revealed that music provides Nigerian youths with a voice through which personal struggles, aspirations, and social concerns are articulated. Through lyrics, genres, and participatory practices, music enables young people to negotiate identity, affirm self-worth, and sustain hope amid socio-economic uncertainty. In addition, music was found to promote social awareness by encouraging reflection on societal challenges and stimulating dialogue within peer and community spaces.

Importantly, the findings also highlight music's capacity to foster community cohesion and collective belonging, reinforcing its role as a unifying social force across ethnic, religious, and generational boundaries. However, while

music holds transformative potential, the study affirms that its impact on long-term social change is not automatic. Without supportive educational frameworks, ethical guidance, and institutional investment, musical empowerment may remain symbolic rather than sustainable.

Generally, the study contributes to ongoing discourse on youth development by positioning music as both a cultural heritage and a strategic resource for empowerment and social transformation in Nigeria. It underscores the need to intentionally integrate music into broader conversations on education, civic engagement, and sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Government agencies and youth-focused institutions should recognize music as a legitimate tool for empowerment by integrating creative arts into national youth development policies and programmes. Structured music initiatives can support skills development, civic education, and social inclusion.
2. Educational institutions should strengthen music education at the basic, secondary, and

tertiary levels. Emphasis should be placed not only on performance but also on creativity, ethics, entrepreneurship, and social responsibility, enabling youths to harness music for constructive engagement.

3. Faith-based organizations, cultural centers, and community groups should establish inclusive music programmes that encourage collaboration, mentorship, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Such spaces can enhance community cohesion and nurture positive youth identity.

4. Artists, educators, and media platforms should promote responsible musical expression that upholds dignity, cultural values, and social consciousness. Media literacy initiatives can also help youths critically engage with musical content.

5. Stakeholders in the creative industry should provide access to training, funding opportunities, and professional mentorship to support sustainable livelihoods within music-related fields, reducing youth unemployment and economic vulnerability.

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